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U. S. Has Vast International Arms Business

By BERNARD D. NOSSITER
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"The War Business: the International Trade in Armaments," by George Thayer (Simon and Schuster, $6.95).

During the Civil War, George Thayer reminds us, J. P. Morgan bought 5,000 defective carbines for $3.50 each and sold them to the Union army for $22. Although the weapons shot off the thumbs of many of their users, Morgan, of course, was paid in full.

One hundred years later, the government's energetic arms salesmen, from

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the Pentagon and State Department, persuaded Bonn to buy 250 Lockheed Starfighters, nicknamed the "widow maker" in Germany. Well before the 91st crash, the docile pro-Washington Erhard government had fallen, leaving Lockheed free to go on to other triumphs with its Cheyenne helicopter and C-5A Galaxy.

Thanks to technology and bureaucratic rationalization, as Thayer makes abundantly clear, the modern arms trade can produce interesting political as well as physical repercussions. At about the same time as the unfortunate Germans were being touted on Lockheed, Britain was persuaded to buy the American Skybolt missile for its deterrent. When the program was abruptly halted, it not only helped bring down the friendly Macmillan government, it also convinced Gen. De Gaulle that the British were little more than an American satellite and unfit for membership in the Common Market.

Thayer credits the computerized efficiency of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy and a few other high priests of the Kennedy-Johnson era with lifting the world arms trade to a new level of intensity. Thanks to their legacy, the United States is systematically spreading around the world $2 billion a year in "conventional" arms.

Perhaps $500 to $600 million annually feeds the swollen armories of Argentina, Liberia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand and the other so-called developing nations whose appetite for weapons is insatiable. Indeed, as Thayer suggests, without the endless supply of weapons from the United States, its followers in the west and its Soviet-bloc imitators, it is unlikely that India and Pakistan would have gone to war in 1965 and that Israel and her Arab neighbors would be at each other's throats for a fourth round. There is a mordant symmetry in all this.

Just as the world's most affluent democracy dominates the government trade in arms, so too it boasts the leading "private" weapons merchant, the ubiquitous Samuel Cummings of Interarms. With good reason, Thayer doubts that Interarms is all that distinct from the CIA and concludes that there is at least a remarkable degree of cooperation. It was Cummings' agents who tipped off Washington that the Czechs were about to sell arms to President Arbenz of Guatemala, a discovery that prompted the CIA to overthrow that worthy with weapons supplied by Cummings.

Thayer, a political scientist by training and a journalist, in the best sense of the word, by inclination, wrote an earlier book on the lunatic fringes of American politics. Here, he examines, in loving detail, the lunatic center with side glimpses into the smaller, but equally intensive efforts mounted in Britain, France, the Soviet Union and other up-to-date nations. Combined, they sell $5 billion a year around the world, arming Portugal and her Angolan rebels, Castro and anti-Castroites, Arabs and Israelis, Nigerians and Biafrans, Pakistanis and Indians with equal indiscriminacy.

The trade, Thayer concludes, encourages arms races among nations that have more pressing needs and insures that political conflicts will be transformed into wars. Thanks to modern exigencies, the old-fashioned merchants of death have become extinct. "We now have detached, cold-blooded mistakes made by bureaucrats."

The chief responsibility for this state of affairs, Thayer demonstrates, lies with the United States and its arms aid program. His suggestions for a more modest, controlled approach hardly measure up to the dimensions of the entrenched system he has described. But then it is not recorded that Hercules was required to do more than clean out the Augean stables.

Thayer has written a lucid, entertaining and well-documented study on a theme of some importance. Unhappily, its information and its conclusions are so devastating to all governments everywhere, "responsible" people have no choice but to ignore it. This is a pity. In a less well organized world, Thayer's work would deserve that overworked description, a book of great importance.